

Master's Thesis Evaluation Form

Student's name: Lazha Barznji

Thesis title: The Aftermath of the Halabja Genocide through its Photographs: Post-Memory and Commemoration

Name of the supervisor: doc. Maria Alina Asavei, D.Phil.

Name of the opponent: Sandra Lábová, Ph.D.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the thesis? Please give your reasons for the suggested grade in detail below.

1. *Does the author show an understanding of one or more theories, and use theory to generate a hypothesis or to make the problem area more understandable?*

YES AND NO

Comments:

The introduction and theoretical framework are sufficiently developed, and the study's motivation, aim, and objectives are clearly explained.

In the findings, Lazha Barznji connects her insights to Roland Barthes' notion of myth. However, this term and the theory behind it are not explained. The author links it to Barthes' publication *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, which, however, is not focused on mythology at all. On the other hand, the chapters on collective memory, the myth of photographic truth, and iconicity in photography are well-developed, although they do not offer any new perspectives.

2. *Is the research question articulated clearly and properly? Is the research question sufficiently answered in the conclusion?*

YES and NO

Comments:

The research questions are straightforward but could be refined to enhance clarity and focus. For instance, the term "meaning" of the cultural memory of the Halabja Genocide is somewhat vague and may be difficult to assert. Using a term like "significance" would be more precise and better aligned with academic analysis, providing a clearer direction for the study.

The discussion and findings are underdeveloped. The discussion section reads more like a summary, lacking in-depth analysis and connections to the theoretical framework and

literature review. Additionally, the conclusions do not fully address the research questions, leaving critical aspects of the study unresolved.

3. *Is the thesis based on relevant research and literature and does it accurately summarize and integrate the information?*

YES

Comments: The chapter on historical context is well-developed and provides a solid foundation for further analysis.

4. *What is the quality of the data or the other sources? Are the sample method, data collection, and data analysis appropriate?*

NO

Comments:

Overall, the research method represents a core weakness of the study. It is not adequately explained and appears to be incorrectly applied. The author cites Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* as a reference; however, this book is a theoretical, personal essay that does not provide a methodological framework - in contrast to the author's claim: "Barthes further developed semiotic analysis within photography through *Camera Lucida*." (p. 21) Similarly, the claims "incorporating insights from the semiotic analysis of Saussure" (p. 22) are used without adequate explanation and without references to Saussure being provided. What publication is the author using? As a result, Barznji's description of "classical semiotic analysis" is somewhat general and lacks clear definitions and relevant references. Including additional sources to support this discussion would be beneficial. Furthermore, the connection between photographic representation, other artistic and visual forms, and the poems included in the analysis is not thoroughly discussed or explained. Additionally, the concept of "general photo-thematic analysis," which the author claims to use (p. 11), is not clearly defined or, from my perspective, applied later in the study, raising questions about its application and results.

The meaning of the statement "Collectively we own a collection of 622 photos..." (p. 20) is unclear.

5. *Are the findings relevant to the research question? Are the conclusions of the thesis based on strong arguments?*

NO

Comments:

First, I am unclear on why the introductory text of Chapter 5.1, *Understanding the Photographs of the Halabja Genocide*, was included. Some sections of this text resemble a material sampling, others read as theoretical exposition, and some come across as personal reflection. For instance, the section, which states, "*One of the unrecognized duties of these photographs of the Halabja Genocide for Kurds is that these photographs serve as an essential document for the post-memory of the Kurds and support the Kurds in having a shared sense of community, the 'imagined community'. Through them, they feel closer to one another as a community despite being a nationless body. It was through the photos that political forces tried to prove what happened was real and attempted to create a collective public response to the Kurdish cause in Iraq, ultimately to demand freedom from a regime*

that killed them" (p. 25) seems inappropriate for inclusion in an MA thesis. This passage blurs the lines between analysis and personal reflection and lacks the scholarly rigor expected in such a context.

Furthermore, the analytical approach employed raises significant questions. Lazha Barznji's analysis comprises two parts that address pivotal inquiries. In the initial segment, the focus is on photography. Barznji delineates between two levels of image interpretation: "Signifiers" and "Signified." However, the interpretations at both levels appear similar, leaving uncertainty as to whether the author possesses a comprehensive understanding of semiotic terminology despite briefly referencing Saussure (without reference) in the methodological section. While the interpretation of the showcased photographs may appear compelling, the analysis lacks a solid methodological foundation, rendering it somewhat unscientific. Moreover, the interpretation of findings through the perspective of Roland Barthes' myth is not supported by any theoretical framework.

The second part of the analysis, which examines other artistic expressions related to the theme of the Halabja Genocide, remains shrouded in ambiguity. It is unclear why and how the specific examples were chosen, and the author fails to establish analytical and argumentative connections with the studied photographs. Moreover, the analytical methodology employed in this section remains undisclosed, contributing to the lack of clarity. Given the fact that Lazha Barznji does not sufficiently explain the process of the semiotic analysis and its appropriateness for the research objectives, it is questionable whether the semiotic analysis is the best fitted for indented research, as other methods could have been considered, such as multimodal discourse analysis (that has a potential to treat different cultural and media production).

6. *Are the author's thoughts distinguished unambiguously from the borrowed ideas?*

Yes

Comments:

To my knowledge, the author uses referencing properly and cites direct quotations and borrowed ideas.

7. *Is the thesis containing original/innovative research (in terms of topic, approach, and/or findings)?*

Yes and no

Comments: From my perspective, the topic of the thesis is original and has the potential to enrich scientific knowledge of the Halabja Genocide while at the same time resonating in the public discussion and understanding of the event. On the other hand, the findings do not provide a scientific approach due to the sloppiness of the methodology, analysis, and argumentation.

8. *What is the quality of style and other formal requirements?*

Mostly good

Comments: The structure of the thesis would benefit from some revisions. For example, Chapter 4.6 would be more appropriately placed in the conclusions section, as recommendations for future studies should be based on and derived from the findings.

9. *Are there any other strengths and weaknesses of the thesis, which are not included in the previous questions? Please list them if any.*

NO

Comments:

10. *What topic do you suggest for the discussion in the thesis defence?*

Comments:

Lazha Barznji should:

- 1) explain the concept of myth and provide relevant literature,
- 3) explain the research design and sampling procedure,
- 4) explain the process of semiotic analysis, while at the same time providing the arguments for appropriate use of this method for the research objectives. She should also provide a theoretical framework for the methods,
- 5) explain how the discussed visual non-photographic data was sampled and the method used for its analyses.

Overall assessment of the thesis:

(Please, state clearly whether the thesis is or is not recommended for a defence and write the main reasons for the recommendation).

The presented thesis promises interesting research and could contribute to the scholarly discussion in the field. The author proposes a unique perspective that has not been extensively covered in existing literature and might offer new insights and potential avenues for future research. However, the outcome exhibits numerous deficiencies, which I have outlined above. I do suggest grading E (generally sound work with a number of notable errors).

Proposed grade: E

(A- B: excellent, C-D: very good, E: good, F: fail)

Date: September 9, 2024

Signature: